THE HONORING OF PARENTS

May 17, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Exodus 20:1-17
Ephesians 6:1-4

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." -Exodus 20:12 (RSV)

That is the text this morning. "Honor your parents - that your days may be long." I should like to put beside it several other texts for the purposes of illumination... First, Robert Browning...

> "Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life for which the first was made;
> Our times are in his hand
> Who saith, 'A whole I planned: youth shows
> but half: trust God; see all: nor be afraid."

My third text grows out of the soil of human experience, Chicago, Illinois, the United States of America, in the year of our Lord 1987. It is not a poem. It is not romantic. It is not inspiring. It is what older people say with great consistency when we take the time to listen. It goes like this.

"I used to think that old people must be afraid of dying. But now I'm old and you know what scares me more than dying? Living... What will I do if I get hurt or really sick? All I can do is hope and pray that I die quickly."

Those are the perimeters for a sermon based on the Fifth Commandment, about aging in America. It is, I submit, one of the very few topics which is relevant to everyone of us... without exception... for you are either yourself an older person... (For the moment, we will leave the definition intentionally ambiguous. I have made a discovery that for me at least, the definition of "middle age" and "old age" keeps changing!)

In any event you are either an older person, or your parents are older persons or you will one day, God willing, be an older person yourself. There is a sense in which it is the most relevant topic. Self

interest alone dictates that we pay attention to it.

But first, the Bible, the Fifth Commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."

The Ten Commandments were received by the tribes of Israel in the midst of their wandering through the Sinai wilderness. It is not accurate to refer to them as a nation prior to that. For several generations they had been a captive people in Egypt. They were a loose federation of Semitic tribes. No more. After the Exodus, during the period of wandering in the wilderness, the idea of nationhood was born among them. And the initial impetus, the primal structure for their sense of themselves as a nation was the covenant with God and the law and at its heart the Decalogue, the building blocks for a new society in which God would be king, and in which God's will and plan for the whole creation would be done. These Ten Commandments are far more important than rules for every day conduct. They are the principles upon which a people could live in a faithful relationship with God. They are the foundation upon which the new society, its customs, traditions and institutions would be built.

The Fifth Commandment reflects an important principle of this new society. The family will be its basic unit. Family must be preserved, protected, nurtured.

Marriage is so highly valued that somewhere in the ancient law it is forbidden for a newly married soldier to be sent away to battle for a period of time after the wedding: a wise and very pragmatic idea if there ever was one! Children were to obey, respect, and be loyal.

Now Old Testament scholars and historians help us to see that there is something else going on in the Fifth Commandment, something potentially more important than a guideline for parents and child. The real focus of the Fifth Commandment, it has been suggested, is aging in general, and in particular adults who had to cope with the reality of an aging parent. In tribal culture, where people are always on the move, one who is crippled, or sick, or unable to keep up, can be a problem. The Fifth Commandment's real interest, the scholars suggest, is to prohibit the prevalent practice at the time of abandoning the elderly when they were no longer capable of caring for themselves - a practice preserved in some cultures in the world today overtly and in others, quietly, surreptitiously. [See The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1, p. 935]

The real intent of the Fifth Commandment is not simply that children treat their parents politely, but a whole, stable, societal system in which age is honored and in which all the elderly are regarded as the parents of the culture, who must be valued and cared for, for the welfare and health of the culture itself. The Fifth Commandment has everything in the world to do with politics and economics, that is to say.

Many centuries later Jesus of Nazareth illustrated the principle. He was a part of the culture which was built on the Fifth Commandment. The best deductions are that Joseph his father died long before Jesus arrived at the age of thirty. According to the normative custom Jesus would have

learned his father's trade, and upon his death assumed the business and the responsibility of the household. It is likely, therefore, that many of those thirty years were spent in the carpenter shop and caring for his mother and brothers and sisters. The Gospel narrative indicates that Jesus continued to care for his mother during his public ministry. There is no more eloquent, nor poignant example of Hebrew family solidarity than Jesus, near death, remembering to ask his dear friend to care for and assume his responsibility for his mother.

One of the major concerns facing our culture at this point in history is the family. We have, everyone agrees, a crisis on our hands. The family in America has changed fundamentally. As we have become urban, mobile and affluent, the traditional functions of the family - which, when you think about it, remained fairly consistent from the time of Moses into the Twentieth Century - those functions have been, one by one, stripped away and assumed by other institutions. "Home" seems sometimes like nothing more than a twenty-four hour fast food service, laundromat, youth hostel.

My concern this morning is not with the particular dynamics of parenting and child raising and the prospects for the family. Rather my concern is the concern of the Fifth Commandment: how the whole culture honors or dishonors - the parents of the culture, the elderly.

Who are we talking about? Acknowledging that aging is something that happens to other people, let us begin by acknowledging that 11.7% of our population is over 65. That's 27.4 million people and the number is growing twice as fast as the population at large. When the "Baby Boomers" hit 65 there will be 65 million older Americans.

Contrary to popular perception, 5% of those older persons live in institutions.

31% of them live alone,
32% live in center of cities,
22% are poor or near poor.

The impersonal statistics become very real in the prototype: 75, alone, 500 miles from the closest relative, making it financially - but barely, living in fear of the next rent increase, fear of debilitating illness, fear of medical bills, wanting to be independent - but knowing that the worst case scenario is more and more a possibility - i.e., - health disaster... money gone... no where to go..., to say nothing of urban crime and the ever present fear of aloneness, of being forgotten. "I used to be afraid of dying" they say. "Now, I'm afraid of living."

The culture has forgotten. The culture either doesn't want to or doesn't know how to honor its parents. We have become convinced that these matters are all private, that there are no public issues here, that if we simply pump up the economy and encourage everyone to save for a rainy day, it will turn out all right. Well it doesn't. It never did much - and now it is a national disgrace.

At the new perconceptual level the culture is obsessed with

youthfulness and inclined to regard aging as wearing down and wearing out, a process so unpleasant that we are better off ignoring it and pretending as if it does not exist, or nervously laughing at it.

Think, for instance, of the demeaning stereotypes of aging which television continues to exploit for a few cheap laughs. Professor Sittler, in an essay on aging - a topic in which he has experience and wisdom - observes... "The fact that human life has a limit is to the technically informed culture of the West, an awkward fact. Popular culture is invited to assume that knowledge, resolution, time and money can solve all problems." [Grace & Gravity, p. 121] It can't, of course. Aging is not a problem to be fixed, solved or disguised. Aging is the human condition. It is what we do. To become an older person is God's intent, God's will, God's plan. It is the goal, the object of the enterprise. It is what we are about.

The culprit in this matter, many think, is mandatory retirement, retirement at 65 which implicitly conveys a judgment about the value or non-value of people. You know, of course, or if you don't know you should, that retirement at 65 was not the result of anyone's gerontological research. Rather it was Otto von Bismark's arbitrary economic decision, made to save Germany money. 65 is when most people died in the last century and so Bismark reasoned, if 65 was the retirement age, Germany's social security system would remain solvent.

In any event, we do have a way of assuming that at 65 you ought to stop doing what you've been doing, move aside and let someone else do it, even if it means there is nothing worthwhile for you to do, which is precisely what it does mean for most people. About ten years ago I was a member of a Presbytery Committee, part of whose job it was to think about and support the retired ministers. We had a lot of them. We got the idea that we'd form a committee and have them do something. We asked four of them to get together and write a paper for the Presbytery called "The Theology of Retirement." They were a distinguished group. During their careers they had worked as a Synod Executive, a missionary to China, a campus pastor, and parish pastor... four vigorous, charming men - all of whom were good friends of mine.

They produced a very salty document. I think the first thing they discovered when they got together was that they were angry. So they scolded us. They challenged the very notion of a "theology of retirement." In fact they said it was an alien concept, a contradiction in terms. There is no divine mandate here, they told us. Don't attribute to God any notion of retirement.

Christian theology, they wrote, sees life as an unbroken continuum from birth to death. Defiantly they said, "As long as life and health are given to us there cannot be a Christian theology of retirement."

"Senility" they suggested, "is simply a self-fulfilling prophecy." And in their best flourish they wrote, "We do not lose our capacities because of age but because of disuse. There is truth in the statement that we do not grow old but rather that when we cease to grow we become old."

We need a new theology - or perhaps an old theology, reshaped for this world. Life is a blessed continuum, from beginning to end. We need to think anew - to convert our thinking in light of our faith. Aging is not wearing out... it is maturing, growing. At the level of conceptualization, we need to see older people differently... Boo whenever a comedian exploits aging for a cheap laugh... and cheer for Judd Hirsch's wonderful portrayal of a passionately and impossibly alive old man in "I'm Not Rappaport."

Be informed by an image of aging contrary to the cultural idiom of wearing out and wearing down... Hear poetry like this... which suggests another way of seeing older people - and the process of aging which is happening to you...

"It ought to be lovely to be old
to be full of the peace that comes from experience
and wrinkled ripe fulfillment...

Soothing, old people should be, like apples
when one is tired of love.
Fragrant like yellowing leaves, and dim with
the soft stillness and satisfaction of autumn.

And a girl should say:
It must be wonderful to live and grow old.
Look at my mother, how rich and still she is!-

And a young man should think:
By jove, my father has faced all weathers,
But it's been a life!"

That's D. H. Lawrence - Beautiful Old Age.

We need to think anew. And we, we Christians particularly, need to be informed by our own tradition of honoring and caring for our elderly.

There are justice issues here. We need to agitate for this wonderfully productive and compassionate system to find a way to meet the health-care needs of its elderly...

There is a mission mandate as well. We sit in the middle of an enormous concentration of aging people, who are independent, want to remain independent and who, with a little help, can remain independent. Our own Senior Center, at this moment, is making new and exciting plans - to put the Fifth Commandment into action...

We need to think anew and act anew. And we need to listen, carefully... Maggie Kuhn - advocate for elderly persons and founder of the Grey Panthers, says it beautifully. "We are not 'senior citizens,' or 'golden agers.' We are the elders, the experienced ones; we are maturing, growing adults responsible for the survival of our society. We are not wrinkled babies (in glorified playpens), succumbing to trivial purposeless waste of our years and our time." [Maggie Kuhn on Aging, p. 14]

Think of what the elders, the experienced ones have done.

At 100 Grandma Moses was still painting.

At 94 Bertrand Russell was organizing peace marches.

At 93 Bernard Shaw wrote "Farfetched Bables."

At 90 Picasso was producing drawings.

At 89 Schweitzer was doctoring.

At 88 Michelangelo designed a church.

At 82 Churchill wrote his four volume History of the English Speaking Peoples.

At 81 Benjamin Franklin made a speech and affected the compromise that led to the adoption of the Constitution of the United States of America. [See Hoover Rupert in Outlook, 9/14/81]

How poor this world would be without the products of life lived on that full and blessed continuum from birth to death.

Martin Marty reported a University of California study which showed that "the person most likely to be working for humanitarian causes and world peace today isn't a young college student. It's your grandmother. The most politically active people in the United States are grandmothers." [Jim Aylward, Leaders, in Context, 3/15/79]

I speak now personally to you... who are our elders, our experienced ones. This culture needs you. You have a sense of history the rest of us can't have yet. You have seen more and lived through more great events than any generation before you. You witnessed what people my age and younger only read about. And don't tell us that your memory is slipping, by the way. That's another self-fulfilling stereotype. You do have much more to remember. But, as a matter of fact, because your education relied much more heavily on memorization, you can remember more and better than most of us. A Michigan neurologist tried that thesis. He asked fifty people in their 80's and 90's to memorize a section of the Congressional Record. Then he asked fifty college people to memorize the same material. Without exception the people in their 80's and 90's memorized more swiftly and with greater ease than their younger counterparts. And their recall was more accurate over a longer period of time. Selective recall? Perhaps. Remembering what you want to remember and forgetting the rest? Maybe. But your memory isn't going bad at all!

Erik Erikson said that old age is "a time of integrity, of absolute honesty." [Kuhn, op. cit., p. 14] We need that. I was delighted to encounter again the much quoted vignette about Artur Rubenstein. Someone told him, when he was 80, that he was playing better than ever. He said, "I think so. Now I can take chances I never took before. You see the stakes are not so high. I can afford it. I used to be so much more careful. No wrong notes. Not too bold ideas. Now I let go and enjoy

myself and to hell with everything but the music."

We need that too, that gathering up, that sense of what is important and what is unimportant, that integrity.

I thank God for my mentors, the experienced ones...

For Amelia Henry who, at 104, was cooking for her 75 year old son, and who, when her ministers pleaded with her to see a doctor - at least for a physical, used to say, "Oh yes, a lot of my friends used to go to doctors. They're all dead now."

And for Professor Sittler who, in his 80's, nearly blind, is read to every day, and who not long ago traveled from Hyde Park to Chestnut and Michigan by bus.

And for Jean Wilson, who missed her beloved Belfast and used to regale me and enrich my life with stories of watching the Titanic slip her moors for her maiden voyage.

And for Mr. Anstaett, who when his nurses and sons could no longer allow him on the golf course, used to stand on his lawn with a club in his hand, and play 18 holes, without walking a step.

And for Carrie Stevens, a member of the parish, who died last week at 107 and who played the piano every day of her life and would favor the visiting ministers with "You Are My Sunshine."

I thank God for that - and for the faith to which it points. Because in terms of perspective and faith - age does seem to know something youth is only in the process of learning: namely that aging is or can be growing: that the God who gave life, continues to nurture and sustain life, like a loving parent, and that there is nothing in life which will separate us from God; that the final enemy is actually not an enemy at all, and that the accumulated years are not a burden to be wearily born but a crown to wear with pride and dignity.

So, it is time to say out loud what all of us know in our hearts - that when needs are added up, older people need younger people, but perhaps not nearly as much as younger people need older people: that a whole God planned; youth shows but half... that there is deep truth and importance to the ancient injunction, "Honor your mother and your father that your days may be long on the land which the Lord your God has given you."

We need one another. God planned it that way. The best is yet to be. Thanks be to God.

Praise to you, Lord God,
for the blessed continuum of life.

Praise to you, Creator God,
for the miracle of life.

Praise to you, Providential God,

nurturer and care-taker - for your wisdom expressed in the maturing, growing, aging process of life...

Praise to you, Almighty God, for your great love to us and your presence with us in all our days.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.